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El Salvador: Back From the Brink

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MARCH 1972. He had just been elected president of El Salvador. But the army, which ran the country, prevented him from taking office. He was arrested, blindfolded, beaten savagely, eventually exiled. With that,



Led by José Napoleón Duarte, its first democratically elected president in more than 50 years, this once-beleaguered land finally has its Moscow-backed insurgents on the run

the Salvadoran generals concluded that they were rid of José Napoleón Duarte forever.

They were wrong. After seven years of exile, Duarte returned to El Salvador. On June 1, 1984, he became only the second democratically chosen civilian president ever to take office in that Central American country.

Under Duarte's direction the Salvadoran army, now reorganized and retrained by U.S. military personnel, is making great strides against

El Salvador's cocksure communist guerrillas. After five years of laying waste to the country, the guerrillas are, as one American adviser puts it, "looking over their shoulders and sleeping in their boots."

If the Salvadoran army contin-

ues to make progress against the guerrillas, as most knowledgeable observers predict, the consequences will be profound. El Salvador was targeted years ago by the communist world for an armed takeover. At Moscow's direction, Cuba and Nicaragua provided the Salvadoran guerrillas with arms, ammunition, training and political backing. The Soviets counted on victory in El Salvador as the first round in a concerted campaign to turn Central America and the Caribbean, regions that lie on our doorstep, into Marxist strongholds.

Astounding Change. Recent visitors to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, can scarcely believe that a war is going on. Situated on the slopes of a volcano, bathed in dazzling tropical sunshine year-round, San Salvador is one of the most pleasant cities in Central America. Its tranquillity is usually shattered only by tumultuous soccer matches that draw tens of thousands of wildly excited fans.

To those who knew San Salvador in 1980, when the insurgency was getting into high gear, the change is astounding. The guerrillas operated openly in the capital then, carrying out assassinations, kidnapping businessmen for ransom, murdering residents who refused to contribute to their cause.

A military dictatorship that had lasted nearly 50 years was toppled in October 1979, in a coup d'état staged by reform-minded officers. They set up a military-civilian junta that Duarte, back from exile, eventually headed. But it was a government that had virtually no control over its incompetent and corrupt army. Thus the guerrillas roamed unchallenged across much of the nation, destroying crops in the field and crippling the economy. Half a million Salvadorans were driven from their homes in the fighting, and unemployment soared to an estimated 40 percent. Nicaragua had fallen to the pro-Soviet Sandinista guerrillas the year before, and many Salvadorans feared that their country would be next.

Ebbing Tide. U.S. military aid eventually blunted the guerrilla onslaught, although the Administration had to squeeze every last dollar from a Vietnam-mesmerized Congress that preferred to ignore the Soviet-Cuban threat. From 8000 men five years ago, the Salvadoran army has expanded to nearly 30,000. Corrupt and inept officers have been retired; younger men, many trained in service schools in the United States, have taken over. In 1980 the Salvadoran army had, at any one time, only two or three helicopters in flying condition. Today it has 36 UH-1 "Huey" helicopters that can airlift crack units into combat within minutes.

In late 1983, when I was in northern Morazán Province, the military commander there told me that the entire region to the north of the Torola River was a guerrilla stronghold. A year later, when I returned, government forces had crossed the river and retaken all of the towns formerly occupied by the guerrillas. Helicopter mobility had made it possible.

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The guerrillas were once able to mass 1000 men routinely for assaults on isolated towns or garrisons. Now, as a result of the army's improved performance and its new air capability, the guerrillas generally are forced to break up into groups of 25 to 30, constantly on the move to stay alive. Intelligence

sources report that the guerrilla high command wanted to stage offensives in the spring and fall of 1984, but that they simply did not have the strength to do so. Salvadoran officials anticipate that the guerrillas, now that they are on the run in the countryside, may attempt to revive terrorism in the cities.

But more and more, the guerrillas are seen by the Salvadoran people as losers, the worst fate that can befall a guerrilla. Duarte's election came as another setback. While the guerrillas could claim in the past that they were fighting a military dictatorship, they now are seeking to destroy a democratic government.

"Our Kind." A short, powerfully built man with a craggily handsome face, the 59-year-old Duarte, known as Napo to his friends, is one of the world's toughest heads of state. For most of his political career, he has lived in constant danger of assassination—by communists on the left and by fanatics on the right. His enemies describe him as a "bombastic egomaniac," and even his friends concede that he is not lacking in self-confidence.

Duarte grew up in the slums of San Salvador. When he was a teenager, his father, an often-unemployed tailor, won \$16,000 in a lottery. The money enabled the father to send his son to the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. Young Duarte supported himself there by working as a waiter, dishwasher and window cleaner, quickly picking up English in the process. Graduating

with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering in 1948, he returned home and got a job as an engineer with an architectural firm.

Later, as a partner in the firm, Duarte supervised the construction of many buildings in San Salvador. And soon the one-time slum kid was prosperous. Plunging enthusiastically into civic work, he headed El Salvador's Boy Scouts and gladdened his way through Central America, organizing service clubs. He also found time to help set up El Salvador's volunteer fire association, be active in the Red Cross and teach structural calculus at the University of El Salvador.

A practicing Catholic, Duarte was one of the founders, in 1960, of El Salvador's Christian Democratic Party, which presented itself as an alternative to communism in seeking reforms by peaceful means. Duarte served three two-year terms as mayor of San Salvador, where he built a new central market and introduced street lighting in low-income neighborhoods.

Then, in 1972, he won the presidential election as a centrist-coalition candidate. After the military installed its own candidate in his place, a group of officers attempted a counter coup, and asked Duarte to assume the presidency. But the coup failed.

For seven years, Duarte lived in exile in Caracas, Venezuela. Once again he prospered, becoming general manager of a construction company. He hurried home after

the coup in 1979, and eventually became president of a military-civilian junta preparing for a return to democratic rule.

The junta scheduled elections for a constituent assembly that would write a new constitution. The guerrillas ordered the public to boycott the elections and threatened to kill those who went to the polls. Nonetheless, some 85 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. The guerrillas also tried to disrupt the presidential elections in March 1984, but about 75 percent of the electorate turned out. As Duarte

failed to receive a majority, a runoff was held in May, with an estimated 80-percent turnout. Duarte won 54 percent of the vote and was sworn in as president.

On a visit to Washington after the election, Duarte charmed U.S. Congressmen, many of whom had previously opposed military aid to El Salvador. "I'm putting my life on the line," he told them. "Don't leave me standing alone." Won over, Rep. Clarence Long (D., Md.), then chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and a skeptic on Salvadoran aid, paid Duarte the supreme compliment: "He's our kind of man." The result: Duarte persuaded Congress to approve \$62 million in additional assistance for his country.

Facing the Problems. When Duarte took office, many wondered if he could gain control of the army, which had always run the country. A test came four weeks

after his inauguration. Guerrillas attacked the country's largest dam and hydroelectric station at Cerrón Grande. Duarte appeared at the army's operations center, the first time in memory that a civilian leader had dared venture into the inner sanctum of the military. He demanded a briefing, then ordered: "Take the dam back right away." Six hundred airborne troops, flown to the dam by helicopter, turned back the guerrillas before they could seriously damage the facilities.

A further test of the army's loyalty came last October. During a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Duarte surprised everyone by announcing that he was willing to meet guerrilla leaders to discuss

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peace. Some army officers objected that he was foolishly giving the enemy legitimacy by appearing with them in public. But a majority of officers supported the president.

On the appointed morning, Duarte arrived by car at the village of La Palma in a contested area about 45 miles north of the capital. With him were his defense minister and three civilians. By agreement with the guerrillas, the men were unarmed, and had no bodyguards. There to greet Duarte were thousands of his countrymen.

In a five-hour meeting in the village church, Duarte offered the guerrillas amnesty if they would lay down their guns. And he assured them that they could organize a political party to work for change within the system. The guerrillas flatly rejected the offer, showing that they are not much different from other Marxist-Leninist totalitarians who want to shoot their way into power. While both sides seem willing to continue talks, no date has yet been set.

Having gained the confidence and cooperation of the army, Duarte tackled one of his most difficult problems: the *escuadrones de la muerte*, or death squads. These right-wing groups, operating with the tolerance or guidance of high-ranking army officers, are believed to have assassinated thousands of civilians. In an effort to root them out, Duarte disbanded the 110-man intelligence unit of the Treasury Police, widely regarded as being involved in such practices. He fired more than 100 soldiers and police believed to be responsible for abuses, and placed under a single command the Treasury Police, National Police and National Guard, which had functioned as laws unto themselves. Duarte also gave orders that the International Red Cross was free to talk with El Salvador's prisoners any time it chose.

Death squads still operate, but killings of civilians by security per-

sonnel have fallen dramatically. Says Duarte: "I'm trying to convince the army and society that we're *all* worse off if we use violence to solve our problems."

One area where Duarte gets only a passing grade, if that, is his attitude toward El Salvador's business community. Duarte needs the cooperation of businessmen to revive the depressed economy, but relations are mutually cool. Says a knowledgeable American in El Salvador: "He hasn't done enough to make businessmen confident enough to invest. Until he does, the economy won't recover." Duarte's party may also suffer election reverses that could hamper his ability to move the country toward his goals.

Nonetheless, El Salvador has come a long way from those dark days in 1980 when it looked as if it was about to fall to a Soviet-orchestrated onslaught. Salvadoran guerrillas still have fight left in them, and there are bound to be setbacks. Yet the tide in El Salvador has clearly turned. Because we refused to back down—and because one brave man was willing "to put my life on the line"—a potential communist foothold has become instead a budding democracy.